

## The Eye of the Holder

It's not like no one ever told him. Russell, next door, had several cautionary tales he related to Chuck. There were the warnings in that video presentation when they passed out the laptops at work. And the day she dropped off the final divorce papers, Mary Ann left some last words floating in the foyer.

“Be careful Chuck honey, the internet could be nothing but trouble for a guy like you.”

But he'd been living single more than two months, and the guys down at the maintenance department said it was time to get busy. Rodrigo said he had a cousin he could introduce, but the hard laughs bouncing off the block walls a second later made Chuck uneasy. Jacob took him aside, gently patting his back, as if about to share a secret. After a slow turn to look over each shoulder, he quietly told him.

“You know dude, you can find anything you ever wanted online.” After that, Chuck couldn't free the notion from his fluttering mind.

At home that evening he typed in her name and, a few clicks later, the picture came up. He knew it was her right away. For almost half an hour, his frantic pacing nearly cut a path in the carpet before Chuck stoked enough courage to sit back down and send the request. The next afternoon he saw it confirmed right there on the screen. Now they were friends.

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Whenever a work ticket takes him over to the high school, Chuck still makes his way by the trophy case to see those old photos. Denise Hamilton dressed as a cheerleader, Denise as Homecoming Queen, Denise the Senior Class Vice President. Knowing where to look, it's easy

to spot her; the wild, windblown blonde hair, a smile from a toothpaste commercial, those green eyes sparkling like gemstones in sunlight. That's the way he described her anyway, in words he took from other poems and wrote down in one of his own during math class, senior year. No one ever read it but him.

He's held those images in mind ever since. There's a picture of Chuck behind those glass doors, too, just to the right of the track team awards. He stands out because he's the only one who forgot to wear his jersey that day. A couple of the custodians he used to work with still laugh and tease a lot when they catch him standing there in front of the pictures. They don't know he's not staring at himself.

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The giant solar system poster on his old bedroom wall always made Chuck think of how he and Denise traveled their high school hallways in different orbits. Hers was with the perfect, popular kids. His was with those who would never be. He guessed she would always do well in school. Every time report cards came out, they showed her on the honor roll and Chuck, as he would chant under his breath, in the toilet bowl.

The only class he ever really liked was keyboarding. It was always hard to wait until the teacher stopped yakking and let him get his fingers working. Then, the 52 minutes flew right by. Chuck got his name on the board for high WPM scores, even before he found out those letters stood for how fast he could type. Back then, the Special Resource Counselor told him he could build on those typing skills as part of what she called "ongoing therapy." She said he should set aside some regular time every day and write a running auto biography. He still follows that

advice. Every few days he types about stuff that happens and the muscle cars he'd like to drive someday.

Three days into his new friendship, Chuck's universe expanded. He got home from work, checked the laptop, and there it was. A message from Denise. She asked if he was working, where he was living, and made small-talk references to the old days. Chuck fought to keep his fingers off the keyboard, trying to get a firm hold on what to say back. His whole life, people told him he talked too much, often wrapped around the wrong things to say.

He studied what he could see online. He concluded that Denise must live a cheerful life because most comments around her pictures mentioned happy hours. In high school he used to hear stories about wild parties with the crowd she hung with, where parents were out of town and lucky, cool guys got hot make-out sessions in the backseat of cars parked outside. He would lay awake late nights, looking up at hanging airplane models swaying in the ceiling fan breeze, wondering when he would ever get his.

Back then, Chuck figured before Denise could ever fall in love with him, they'd have to spend more time together. He worked a few plans in his head, leading up to the one where he would grab her after cheerleading practice, jam her in the back of mom's station wagon, and keep her tied up in the basement until she understood the kind and caring guy Chuck could be. But when he couldn't see how that could work without including, at some point, stuffing a pair of rolled up gym socks in her mouth, he settled on a different approach.

He would go to State, where she was already accepted. He knew this because of that Tiger sweatshirt she wore on college day with matching knee socks. Chuck envisioned himself graduating with honors, as an architect, because he always liked to draw a lot. A successful

career would follow, with Denise as his business partner and trophy wife. Their wedding pictures would be on the cover of magazines in check-out lines at the grocery store.

Teachers had always said Chuck was smart when he could focus, but maybe that Special Diploma worked against his plan, among other things. He was short on college money, academic achievement, and the ability to concentrate very long on any one idea. His first suspension remained a mystery to him, his only memory of the incident was being punched in the back of the head. When asked about notations in his file during the parent conference the counselor said, in so many words, they meant he was too annoying to be in regular classes.

Permitted to come back to school, he was assigned to the little room in a distant corner of the building with just three other special students. Chuck could focus in that quiet environment with the teacher sitting close, presenting one-on-one lessons. He liked learning and taught himself to get past the smell of her coffee and cigarettes in the mornings as well as the tuna sandwich breath after lunch. With a lot of help from her and the social worker, Chuck found out about scholarships available for people like him. He landed at the community college and on the way to getting his Facility Maintenance Certificate.

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On the fifth day, Chuck's new universe had him as nervous as he could ever recall. Denise messaged for his phone number. They had typed back and forth a few times. He told her about working for County Schools now. How when a campus calls in a repair and he shows up, it's like he's the most popular guy around. How he gets back over to Davis High School, where they graduated, a couple times each week.

That was the last time he saw Denise, twenty-three years gone by, the day they all stood there in caps and gowns on the bleachers for the class picture. The guy that used to work at Wawa once told him Denise got married and moved up north. Her message said they would talk soon. Maybe this week.

All this kicked off a new routine for Chuck. Come home from work, take a shower, heat up some dinner to watch when Wheel comes on, and then sit at the little desk in the breakfast nook with his phone right there by the laptop. Some nights he thought the tingling feeling he had meant the phone might ring any minute.

He remembered Denise dating the co-captain of the football team and other “in” guys while he and Mary Ann were seeing each other, off and on, junior and senior year. Growing up, Chuck’s future ex-wife lived three doors down the street. All the way up to high school, Mary Ann remained painfully shy and had trouble speaking to almost anyone but him. Sometimes it made her so nervous, she’d have to hold one hand with the other to keep them from shaking. They would take it slow on the way to school each day, her holding his arm, while she learned to walk without the leg brace.

After high school, her folks moved away, and Chuck’s parents showed no objection to having him out of the house. They shared an apartment, and both worked part time while attending community college. Mary Ann went straight through to her hygienist permit and a great job at the dental clinic about the time Chuck finished up his certification classes. Those days, whenever anyone said his name there was another one attached to it. It was Chuck and Mary Ann, Mary Ann and Chuck.

They went on like that for a few years, him working for the county and her doing teeth. They'd been together so long, getting married seemed like what they were supposed to do. Mary Ann's cousin at Countrywide said it would be easier to get the mortgage loan that way too, and kept after them right up until they signed the contract. That's how Chuck ended up in the townhome he can't pay for by himself.

As he sat staring at the phone, he heard his neighbor pull in. One of the best things about living there was Russell. He is the retired police sergeant who lives across the driveway shared between their two end units. Chuck talks to him almost every day when he can catch him out on the porch.

About a month before he was scheduled to retire, Russell and another officer were T-boned by an SUV in heavy traffic. The cause of the crash was a distracted driver trying to send a text to the Day Care Center saying she was running late for pick-up. Russell's rehab took the better part of a year, eating up all the days marked on the calendar until he was eligible for retirement. Now, when not at the dog track, he's sitting out on the front porch, smoking his cigar and drinking a diet Pepsi. He usually listens a while to what Chuck has to say. Sometimes he calls out "TMI, TMI" and holds his palm up in the direction of the voice. In Chuck's way of reckoning, he figured out that meant "talking must be interrupted," even if the letters for those words didn't match up exactly.

The creeping darkness outside made him think back to that time when, all of a sudden, Mary Ann started spending more and more time at work. He would drive by and see the clinic closed and dark. She would say it took forever after hours in the back of the building, putting away all those patient files in the right place. The way she looked started to change, too; new

hair style and clothes and fancy makeup like she had been studying the women's magazines stacked on those low tables in the dentist's waiting room.

Then, there was that night he came home late, after working overtime to fix a cafeteria water heater. She was waiting for him on the sofa, holding her face in her hands, crying like he'd never seen. She said she never wanted it to happen this way, but she was leaving. The affair had been going on for about two years. The dentist finally agreed to split from his wife and take Mary Ann to live and work with him at a new practice in some town Chuck never heard of in Ohio. They sat there while the quiet expanded to fill the empty space around them. She slowly reached over to take his hand and turned to speak. There was so much sadness in that face Chuck almost started crying himself.

"Have you ever wanted . . ." the words got caught up like something stuck in the back of her throat. "Wanted something so bad, it becomes part of who you are?" He had. He couldn't be mad at her. "Promise me you'll watch out and take care of yourself. A lot of people out there aren't as nice as you. Have as good a heart as you."

She wiped black streaks of mascara from one side of her face with a paper towel. The other still looked like half a homemade Halloween mask. "If you ever get confused or scared or need to know about something, go talk to Russell. Remember your guardian angel right next door."

She stood up to leave and that was it. She said there were a few things she would want to take with her and would come by to pick them someday soon while he was at work. She didn't know when but said it would be easier for both of them that way. "Can you ever forgive me?"

she turned and asked at the door. “I never planned on leaving you to face everything on your own.” But that’s just what Mary Ann did.

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It finally happened. He was working on his second Snickers bar and halfway through the 2 Liter Mountain Dew when his new Spider Man ring tone went off. Denise’s voice was just like it always played back in his mind. Chuck wasn’t sure what to talk about and didn’t want to say too much. He knew his life would probably seem boring compared to the exciting times she must have. From the way she went on, he guessed talking comes natural to her.

“That’s so cool! You still get to go by the school and everything. I remember all those nights we were out there on the football field, fighting for dear old Davis and the purple and gold,” she said. Then, a bit rushed at the end, “We’ll talk again soon. Ta Ta for now,” right before his phone went quiet. He was so jittery he had to sit there for some time, winding down before bed, rolling around those same old memories.

Senior year was his last chance to go out for football. After the first day at tryouts, Coach Collins pulled him aside and said he heard the cheerleader sponsor was looking for a guy just like Chuck. So, as it turned out, on game nights he was out on the field alright, not in helmet and pads, but in shorts and a pep squad jersey.

Many late nights on the edge of sleep, he still saw that past action-figure of himself, The Holder. Not the guy who places the ball for the field goal kicker. On the sidelines, he would make a stirrup of his hands for Denise to step into, then lift her high above his head. After hoisting her up, he would have to firmly grab a thigh, right above the knee, and hold her steady



while the cheering grandstand crowd watched her shake her pompoms. For those few seconds he could gaze all the way up those long legs into a hallowed place he thought of as Purple Sequin Heaven. After halftime he would try not to touch anything until he could get somewhere private and sniff the residual scent of body lotion on the palm of his hand.

Somewhere around that time in English class, his teacher was conducting the lesson on famous quotes and idiomatic expressions they all should know. Chuck's listening skills ranged wildly depending on subject matter but on this particular day, he was busy with his best drawing of Darth Vader and Princess Leia ever. When he thought he heard Mrs. Leonard say the words, "beauty is in the eye of the holder," it raced right through him. He shot both arms triumphantly, straight above his desk. "Oh, yes!" he shouted out. "I know that's right."

There was a silent 1, 2 count before the raucous classroom laughter erupted. The stunning blush that overtook his face was part embarrassment and part memory that a third suspension would prevent him from graduating with his class in June. But within another few seconds, the bell rang. He grabbed his notebook and made it out the door.

Denise and Chuck never had contact outside those Friday night games. In the hallways during class change, it was like she didn't even know his name. When she saw him coming, she'd turn her head back to the group she always walked with and start laughing like somebody's wisecrack was particularly funny. Still, he guessed that was better treatment than he received from the guys who called out names like Ree-tard or Dumbfuck Chuck and sometimes slammed his head up against the lockers.

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The phone in Chuck's shirt pocket started vibrating frantically just as he got home Friday afternoon. Denise had a lot to say about things he couldn't put in context before she dropped the bomb.

"I can ride down there tomorrow. Maybe I could visit with you and have you show me all the changes to the old place."

"Well, uh, cool," were about the only words he could shape his lips to say. He was dazed and dazzled at the same time. Two weeks before, he wasn't sure she'd remember him. Now, he would be meeting her at the bus station the next day. As he sat there in the breakfast nook, the possibility of them face-to-face in his own home made his head seem to spin before slowly dropping to the countertop.

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Most likely, the events of Saturday will always be a blur for Chuck. Before that morning at the bus station, he could have never envisioned Denise and his old Monte Carlo in one place at the same time. Of course, there were many things he wished he had time to take care of, like getting that rear fender panel painted, but was sanguine in the belief that fresh gray primer always looks good too.

After he picked her up, they drove past the old, popular hangout places. Denise seemed nervous at first and didn't have much to say. Chuck worried that maybe she had second thoughts about coming or being with a boring guy, living a dull life, like him. He also concluded that long bus rides could really wrinkle someone's clothing. And he found himself wondering about the name they might give a perfume with mixed notes of lavender, sawdust, and bus carpet mildew.

She didn't recall his ex-wife, Mary Ann, even though they had been in some of the same classes and worked on several group projects together. Denise did remember the liquor store, though.

"Hey, can we stop here just a sec?" She pointed at the flickering neon tubes in the front window. Inside at the cashier line, holding the vodka, beer and wine, she turned to speak in a quiet voice with eyebrows bumping together like cuddling puppies in the pet shop window. "Haven't been to the bank yet, do you think . . ." Chuck waved away her concern with his wallet in hand. "You're still so sweet," she said. He turned away when he felt that hot blush creeping up from below his collar. Standing there with his eyes closed for a few seconds, he heard Denise ask the cashier to throw in two packs of Marlboro Red.

When they got back to Chuck's place, she loosened up and talked way past his bedtime. He could see that beautiful face from the past still shining through the folds and creases the years hung on it. He could tell her charm was a practiced thing but that didn't keep it from working him over. He noticed there was much more of her now, but the way she carried it somehow made her seem to him like a riper, sweeter fruit. Those were some of the words he was putting together in his head for another poem he might write someday.

Their talk was mostly about her. She told him it was over and done with her controlling, abusive husband. They first met at their A.A. group. It was her second marriage, his third. Chuck fell into the rhythm of nodding at the moving lips and replacing the melted ice cubes in her highball glass.

“So, when I couldn’t get the restraining order in time,” there was a slow sigh with her pause, “I thought it was best to leave town before his release date.” Those beautiful eyes cut up to Chuck’s face. “And so, here I am.”

He was buzzed on the second beer they bought and scared of saying something stupid. He kept thinking the words coming out of her mouth couldn’t have happened to someone like Denise. It was like watching one of those foreign movies Mary Ann used to like, but without the words you could read at the bottom of the screen to understand.

“Chuck, I don’t know how to ask . . .” Denise bowed her head slightly and the way she fluttered those eyelashes stopped his breath. “Any way you have room for me to stay a few days? Just until I can get things settled?”

For Chuck, it was like emerging from hypnosis. He had to find the words and the right way to put them together. “There’s a couple options,” he said, and pointed toward the narrow hallway. “The guest room is made up and ready.”

“That would be so great,” she said, and the tilt of her head meant there was something more coming. “I wonder if I could talk to you about one other thing.”

“Of course, anything.” The tightness in his throat made his voice squeak like twisting a balloon. As it turned out, there was more than one thing she wanted to talk about, but he would have listened all night. The husband was violent, tried to keep her under his thumb and in the dark about their finances, bills and records. He even kept changing the log-on passwords to keep her out of their home computer.

“Do you think you could teach a dummy, like me, how to set up accounts and stuff? I need to make a fresh start.”

“Well, um, sure. We have all day tomorrow.”

“You’re sweet,” she said and flashed that perfect smile. “Good night.” He stared and felt himself shudder as he watched the soles of her bare feet caress the ceramic tiles down the hallway. That would go in the poem, too.

They spent most of Sunday teaching Denise how to work the laptop. She seemed to be a quick study but then again, Chuck always knew she was smart. He pulled out the little binder where he kept all his notes, passwords, gamer screen-name info and some of his most valuable Pokémon cards. Mary Ann had given him the booklet as a graduation present. His name is still visible, stamped on the cover but most of the gold lettering has flaked away. All the dates went wrong after the first year, but he never used the calendar part anyway. He calls it leather even though he knows it’s not. Rubbing his left-hand fingers over it while his right hand works the mouse makes him feel relaxed.

He showed Denise all about moving from screen to screen, keyboard shortcuts, scrolling, and the like. He considered showing her his poems and writings, but the idea made him so nervous, he figured another time might be better. All at once she seemed uneasy, overly careful, and pressed both clenched hands tightly against her lips when she made a mistake. So, he told her.

“Take a break. That might be enough for one day.”

“I’m just so afraid I’m going to break something.”

“Don’t be. You’re doing great. You’ll be a pro before you know it,” he said, but couldn’t muster the nerve to pat her on the back as he first intended. Instead, he told her he was going to bed early. That Mondays were always big days at work. That lot of things in the school business seem to break over weekends.

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With the weekend events floating through his mind, he was running late. He dressed quietly in his room so as not to disturb his sleeping guest. But when he hurried out through the kitchen, he found Denise already sitting there at the laptop.

“Wow, you’re getting an early start. What a great student!” he told her.

“Yeah, but I’m stalled here. I have a hard time with all the usernames and passwords.”

“Yeah, I know. I still write them all down in one, safe place so I can remember.” Right then he unhooked the car keys from his belt and set them on the table in front of her. “In case you need to get out and around while I’m gone.”

“How will you get to work?” The way she had both hands up to the sides of her face, like a cute, confused little girl, made a fluttering feeling in his chest.

“Oh,” Chuck tried to put some clever in his voice, “I have my ways. See you this afternoon.”

“It’s another great day at Davis,” she said with a little laugh. He laughed, too, on the way down to bus stop. That line was what the cheerleaders used back in the day, signing off after the school’s morning announcements.

They tell employees not to make personal calls at work, so he doesn't. But Chuck fought the urge to call the house all day. He desperately wanted to talk about what happened that weekend but remembered how Mary Ann said he told people too much. No one could listen and understand what it meant to him, anyway. He thought again and again about Denise waiting for him at home, working hard to get her life back together and all he would do to help her.

They finished up a little job about 3:15 and he turned on his phone. It powered up with a string of alert noises he'd never heard before. With three maximum ATM withdrawals, his bank account had been locked. MasterCard emailed him a priority number to contact them immediately. It said they wanted him to "confirm flagged purchases ranging outside his customer profile," whatever that meant. He hurried down to the corner and stepped a thousand tiny circles into the concrete until the Route Eleven bus came. When he finally turned the corner to walk up his empty driveway, the unlatched side screen door waved slowly open and closed in the draft between the houses.

The neighbor on the other side of his house from Russell's was watering bushes in the front yard. He called over and said, "Glad to catch you before you're gone for good, Bro." Chuck wanted to ask him what the heck he was talking about. He said he saw a van with out-of-state plates in the driveway that afternoon. "Didn't recognize the guys but they said they were helping you move out of town." Chuck ran toward the open side door.

It was quiet and dark inside the house. Chuck stepped over the odd pieces of mail, spilled cereal boxes, and stray electric cords all strewn across the floor. He leaned over and propped himself on both elbows at the breakfast bar because the stools weren't there anymore. He had planned on Mary Ann taking the flat screen and the sofas, but a lot of other things were

gone, too. He couldn't figure why she'd take his Xbox, the controllers, and all the games. He never knew her to play them. There were so many odd notions spinning around his head it seemed he couldn't grab a firm hold on any one of them.

He smelled the cigar smoke just as he heard the piercing whistle through the screen door. He knew Russell learned to do that from his days as a traffic cop. He was standing there on the porch steps in his old police department ball cap and a faded tee shirt from the last time the Dolphins won the Super Bowl.

“Not to worry, Chuck-O. They got ‘em.” Russell said he had just turned the corner when he saw a rental van peeling out of the driveway. “Got the plate numbers and called the station to run a check. They think they’ve recovered most of your items; furniture, electronics. The whole shootin’ match,” was how he put it. “Come on over to the porch later, if you wanna talk about it.”

Chuck watched him walk back across the drive and tried to piece together what to do next. He left the door open so he could hear the Monte Carlo when it pulled back up the driveway. He looked through each room, hoping to find his laptop to type all this into the auto biography while it was still fresh. His grin spread as wide and fast as his realization; maybe he didn't have such a dull and boring life after all. He couldn't wait to tell Denise all about it.